

# Grand Coulee Journal (excerpt)

May 1998

Text and Photographs By J. Patrick Kelley

The following is an excerpt from an [essay](#) about a week I spent photographing on the Columbia river in May of 1998.

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## Saturday, May 9—Picnic at Steamboat Rock

I've been so obsessed with Steamboat Rock ever since I got here that today I decided I'd hike to the top and see what there was to see. Dan Adams warned me that a person could spend all day messing around up there, and he wasn't wrong. Once I got up there, I didn't want to come down.

Steamboat Rock is basically a huge section of land in the middle of the upper Grand Coulee that didn't get washed away when the canyon was originally created. It's about a mile wide and three miles long, narrow at the north end, which faced into the raging torrent 15,000 years ago, broader at what was the downstream end, and roughly the same height as the canyon walls, about 800 feet from the surface of the lake. From the highway that goes along the edge of Banks Lake, it's easy to see how Steamboat Rock got its name, this squat and looming shape that features prominently (almost as prominently as the dam itself) on every postcard rack in town.

Climbing cheerfully with a neurotically overloaded daypack crammed with food and drink and camera equipment forces me to take it slow and stop frequently on the steep climb to the top. In fact I have to stop for lunch about half way up (blame it on a late start), making a nice little picnic on one of the shelves in the cliff face at the boundary layer between the successive lava flows that formed the pre-flood landscape.

I believe I'm seeing everything at its best. Butterflies and wildflowers too numerous to mention (although perhaps I will mention a few once I'm back home and can consult my field guides), everything still green but with just a tinge of rust and brown to make it more interesting as late spring fades into early summer.

The large number of meadowlarks here is a real treat for someone from Western Washington; we're not used to seeing them all the time and in such numbers. Here's one as I eat lunch. He's perched on the top of a bush at the edge of the cliff above, giving a short sharp *peerk* call, not the bubbling-brook melody you usually associate with meadowlarks. The trail leads up a bowl-shaped draw in the side of Steamboat Rock, formed, one of my guidebooks says, by eddies and whirlpools in the currents during the great floods. However it was formed, the steep walls make a great echo chamber for the call of this meadowlark and his kin. Swallows scold and tumble in high-speed flight at the cliff's edge above, and a kestrel glides, looking for something to eat.



### **Steamboat Rock**

At the top, finally. Some of the swallows turn out to be swifts, larger birds with a radical wing shape and an even more radical flying style, capable of astonishing aerobatics while pursuing their prey of flying insects. When I stand at the cliff's edge the swifts and swallows don't seem to know or care I'm there, sometimes flying within a foot of my head, or so it seems. Until I leave at the end of the day I'll make a game of cataloging the various kinds whooshing and swooshing noises these birds make as they streak by.

Standing on the eastern edge of the plateau I look across at the coulee wall. I know everything is much larger than it appears to my eye. The people in the campground below are tiny; my truck in the parking lot looks like a toy.

It's very quiet up here. The wind, and the birds.

Robin. Raven. Redtail above.

The smell of the sagebrush bushes is very strong, and they're oily to the touch. Over a dozen plants are in bloom up here. One, close to the ground, resembling a succulent, has small round white flowers that are extremely fragrant, like

concentrated lavender. A large bee flies by, and a butterfly is hilltopping about ten feet away. "Long live the pollinators!" I hear myself saying out loud.

Ever since the first night I arrived I've been fascinated by a section of the lake near Steamboat Rock where small islands of granite outcroppings poke up out of the water like miniature continents. From up here I can't help but compare this part of the lake to a scene from "Riven" or "Myst," some sort of proto-mythical world created by the twisted imagination of an altered-consciousness game designer.

I find a perch that looks out over this landscape, and sit with my camera for a few hours, studying the scene as the light changes and snapping a picture from time to time. Sometimes I worry when I travel (and especially, like this trip, when I travel expressly with photography in mind) that I run the risk of living life through the viewfinder and missing the "real story," whatever that might be. This afternoon, though, it seems like I'm able to slow down enough to at least begin to hear, and understand, something of what these rocks are trying to tell me.

As the sun gets lower in the sky I move around to the south end of the plateau, the broad stern of the steamboat. When I first read what they'd done to this canyon, filling it with water to irrigate sagebrush country farms, subsidized water for subsistence farmers, I thought it was a pretty stupid idea. I still hold something like those views, but can't do so exclusively. Because when you look out over the lake, its beautiful blue, those sheer cliff walls, the open sky and clouds above, putting all this water in this place doesn't seem like such a bad idea after all.

Coming down off the mountain I feel tired and spent, but in a sweet, glowing kind of way. Two magpies (another common bird that I have yet to tire of) fly close across my path, startling me, beautiful harlequin gliders with long black tails.

When I get back to the parking lot I drop my pack and lie on my back on the lawn for a few minutes, watching the sky change colors as the sun sets. Steamboat Rock in silhouette. My first impression of this place is still true: everything is beautiful in this light.